

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive, Chicago 5

TELEPHONE: WABASH 2-9410

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

LESTER ARMOUR
SEWELL L. AVERY
WM. MCCORMICK BLAIR
LEOPOLD E. BLOCK
WALTER J. CUMMINGS
ALBERT B. DICK, JR.
HOWARD W. FENTON
JOSEPH N. FIELD
MARSHALL FIELD
MARSHALL FIELD, JR.

STANLEY FIELD
SAMUEL INSULL, JR.
HENRY P. ISHAM
HUGHSTON M. MCBAIN
WILLIAM H. MITCHELL
CLARENCE B. RANDALL
GEORGE A. RICHARDSON
SOLOMON A. SMITH
ALBERT H. WETTEN
JOHN P. WILSON

OFFICERS

STANLEY FIELD.....President
MARSHALL FIELD.....First Vice-President
.....Second Vice-President
SAMUEL INSULL, JR.....Third Vice-President
SOLOMON A. SMITH.....Treasurer
CLIFFORD C. GREGG.....Director and Secretary
JOHN R. MILLAR.....Assistant Secretary

THE BULLETIN

EDITOR

CLIFFORD C. GREGG.....Director of the Museum

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

PAUL S. MARTIN.....Chief Curator of Anthropology
THEODOR JUST.....Chief Curator of Botany
SHARAT K. ROY.....Chief Curator of Geology
KARL P. SCHMIDT.....Chief Curator of Zoology

MANAGING EDITOR

H. B. HARTE.....Public Relations Counsel

Members are requested to inform the Museum promptly of changes of address.

THE ERA OF RETHINKING IN MUSEUM EXHIBITION

A YOUNG MUSEUM of natural history, if it is to be a great one with the whole world as its field, must eagerly accumulate as much as it can, and the emphasis on collecting the material objects known as museum specimens will dominate the outlook of the staff. There is little time for thought, for whole halls cry to be filled, and in many fields of interest opportunities to collect specimens may never again be presented—witness the animals extinct within historic times, and the primitive human cultures transformed or even swallowed up by the spread of civilization. Rivalry with other museums, a combination of the acquisitive instinct with all too human pride and vanity, spurs on the acquisition of specimens and yet more specimens. All this produces an Era of Accumulation as an essential growth-stage of a museum.

During this era, there is a tendency to put everything available on exhibition, and museums can be found whose development was arrested at this stage. Fortunately for American museums, the principle of separation of specimens intended for study from those intended for exhibition was adopted at an early period of their history, and this separation reflects the dual function of museums and museum staffs, of research and publication on one hand, operating as a research institute, and on the other the

preparation of exhibits on a magnificent scale as an educational program.

The end of the era of accumulation in the exhibition halls approaches when the halls and the cases in them are filled. The museum staff, if it be worthy of its extraordinary privilege of intimate contact with the "Three Kingdoms of Nature," with that of Man for good measure, must now take time out from collecting and from the eager preparation of exhibits and yet more exhibits to take thought about the meanings and functions, in the broadest sense, of a museum of natural history. We must turn from an era of accumulation to an *Era of Thought*.

It becomes immediately evident that we have grown without much thought or plan during the era of accumulation. The fine large habitat groups in the zoological halls are themselves a reaction from the rows of stuffed specimens in older museums. But a thoughtful survey shows that they represent what was available rather than what was most needed to fulfill a systematic plan of education. Even the irreducible minimum of a *conspectus of nature* has been only partly accomplished.

As we begin to think more deeply about what we want the visitor to learn from the Museum, our first discovery is that we have exhibited too much. There is no virtue in exhibiting endless rows of arrowheads or pots or even of closely similar shells or sparrows, except for specific purposes. The problem proves now to be to make the most intelligent selection from the older accumulations. Intelligent selection requires much thought, and we have all come to realize what hard work such thinking may be, with an occasional envious moment of recollection of the good old days when we merely mounted and installed what was available. It is much more difficult to select intelligently than it was to accumulate. Most important of all, selection gives us room in our cases for the illustrations and diagrams that are so much more effective as labels than the solid blocks of print that were in vogue thirty years ago.

The new Hall of Invertebrate Paleontology (Frederick J. V. Skiff Hall—Hall 37) is a visible expression of what I have attempted to set forth. The Museum is still only at the beginning of the vast job of rethinking its exhibition program; but important beginnings have been made in every department. The thoughtful visitor may be intrigued to contrast the new halls devoted to the North American Indians with some of the older exhibition halls, in which priceless materials are so crowded together that their intended effect is not accomplished. Perhaps he will understand something of the stimulating atmosphere in a museum that, far from being finished, has begun to grow in a new direction.

KARL P. SCHMIDT
Chief Curator of Zoology

THIS MONTH'S COVER

On our cover is a picture of another of the ten habitat groups of prehistoric animals exhibited in the new Hall of Invertebrate Paleontology (read "An Ancient Sea," page 7, this issue) which was opened formally October 1. It represents the inhabitants of the waters that spread across central North America during the Ordovician period, about 390 million years ago. At least a dozen times since the world began, changes in the elevation of land and sea have caused the oceans to advance across the continents. In the muds and sands deposited in those oceans are fossils that constitute the record of the animals and plants that lived in the advancing waters. Even today, when the continents stand higher and drier than at most times in the past, parts of them lie below sea level and are covered by similar seas, such as Hudson Bay and the North Sea, and there the fossil record is accumulating for the future.

MUSEUM MEMBERS' NIGHT PROVES GALA OCCASION

The Members' Night held at the Museum on October 1 was voted a complete success. Approximately 1,000 Members turned out to see the new Museum film, "Through These Doors," to preview the new Hall of Geologic History of Plants and Animals, and to visit the shops and workrooms on the third and fourth floors of the Museum.

Normally, it is not possible to open the workrooms, preparation rooms, and laboratories to visitors because of the serious interruption to the Museum's scheduled work. On this occasion, however, everything was made available and the staff made every attempt to acquaint the Members with their Museum.

Among the unusual attractions was "Bushman," the celebrated gorilla, which was then in the taxidermy shop in the last stages of preparation. Throughout the evening a large and enthusiastic crowd surrounded this exhibit and questioned the taxidermists concerning methods and problems of preparation. In all departments, however, visitors found much to wonder at. The only disappointment noted at any time during the evening was that lack of time prevented those present from seeing all phases of Museum work.

The success of the first Members' Night has given rise to the hope that such an event may be repeated.



Schmidt, Karl Patterson. 1951. "The Era of Rethinking in Museum Exhibition." *Bulletin* 22(11), 2-2.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25639>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/370824>

Holding Institution

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.